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Schmid, Konrad

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‘Writing on the Heart’ (Jer 31:31–34): An Allusion to Scribal Training? A Response to Joachim J. Krause

Konrad Schmid

Universität Zürich

konrad.schmid@access.uzh.ch

Joachim J. Krause’s article about the “writing” of God’s Torah “on the heart”¹ as an allusion to scribal training in Jer 31:31–34 is a welcome contribution to the understanding of that passage. “Writing on the heart”, according to Krause, evokes the process of memorizing the Torah, and memorizing by heart is a crucial element of scribal education in the ancient world. Krause highlights how his interpretation allows us to refrain from identifying Jer 31:31–34 as an “anti-deuteronomic” redaction, since learning by heart does not make the Torah superfluous. Rather, it implies the complete absorbance of its words by Israel, taught by Yhwh, its teacher.

Krause also notices how Jer 31:31–34 differs from what is usually identified as “Deuteronomic” theology, suggesting the label “Deutero-Jeremianic” as an alternative for classifying this oracle’s redactional provenance.

Nevertheless, as convincing as Krause’s interpretation may seem, some ambiguities make his hypothesis less secure than it appears. In Jer 31:31–34, it might be that the attitude toward to the Torah’s human internalization is more open than Krause assumes and that the question of the continuity and discontinuity to the present situation of how Israel learns Torah is more difficult to determine than he proposes.

Firstly, the main problem is that the expression “writing on the heart” or “writing on the tablet of the heart” is not really an idiom in Biblical Hebrew. Two instances in Proverbs 1–9 (Prov 3:3 and Prov 7:3, *כתבם על־לוח לבך*)² come close to this English translation which has gained prominence in current scholarly discussions, thanks to David Carr’s monograph on scribal education in the ancient world.³ In addition, Deut 6:6–9 and 11:18–

¹ Joachim J. Krause, “‘Writing on the Heart’ in Jeremiah 31:31–34 in Light of Recent Insights into the Oral-Written Interface and Scribal Education in Ancient Israel”, *ZAW* 132 (2020) 236–249.

² See Bernd U. Schipper, *Sprüche (Proverbia) 1–15* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018) 224–226, 445–447, who thinks of material processes of writing down words rather than memorizing them.

³ David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) esp. 28.

20 can be mentioned, but here the term “writing” is lacking. The expression “writing on the heart” is absent from Babylonian literature, but also the occurrences in Greek or Egyptian texts are scant: In Aischylos *Prometheus Bound* 788, one can find the sentence “may you engrave it on the tablets of your mind.”⁴ There is also a similar reference in the Egyptian Satiric/Polemic letter (10/9–11/3): “You are, of course, a skilled scribe at the head of his fellows, and the teaching of every book is incised on your heart.”⁵ Therefore, Krause’s claim (“I suggest that ‘writing on the heart’ is employed in Jer 31:33 in much the same manner as it is elsewhere: as a metaphorical idiom for learning a text by heart.” [244]) lacks grounding in both in the Hebrew Bible and ancient Near Eastern literature. “Elsewhere” is limited to Prov 3:3 and 7:3, texts that might be even later than Jer 31:31–34.⁶

Secondly, even if “writing on the heart” were an allusion to scribal training, the differences between Jer 31:31–34 and scribal training would be far more significant than the commonalities. “Writing on the heart” in Prov 3:3 and 7:3 means that the addressed person himself or herself should learn the commandments that are envisioned by these passages, whereas in Jer 31:31 it is Yhwh who writes the Torah on the heart of Israel. The idiom “writing on the heart” does not explicitly include the notion of a teacher, but it is student-oriented. Jeremiah 31:33 instead has Yhwh “writing” his Torah on the heart of this passage’s addressees, as Krause himself points out. In addition, it is not the students as an elitist group who are affected by this divine action, but the people as a whole, “from the least to the greatest of them” (למקטנם ועד־גדולם).

Thirdly, the passage 31:31–34 is characterized by several stark contrasts and oppositions. This makes it likely that the essence of the “new covenant” is not continuity, but instead discontinuity, with its predecessor, the former covenant when Yhwh led Israel out of Egypt.

Fourthly, Jer 31:33 (נתתי את־תורתִי בקרבם ועל־לבם אכתבנה) is shaped as a parallelism, but it is unclear how to interpret it. It is plagued by two difficulties that seem hardly to be able to be overcome any time soon. The first is the form נתתי, its text-critical evaluation, and the question of its temporal interpretation. The Masoretic text attests a perfect that would hint to a divine action in the past. If so, then בקרבם would be better understood as “in the midst [of their congregation],” not “in their [anthropological] center.” If נתתי את־תורתִי בקרבם looks back to the past, the second part of the parallelism

⁴ Ibid., 98.

⁵ Ibid., 8, 63, 73.

⁶ See Markus Witte, “The Book of Proverbs (The Sayings of Solomon/Proverbs),” in *T&T Handbook of the Old Testament*, ed. Jan C. Gertz et al. (New York: T&T Clark, 2012) 569–585.

ועל־לבם אכתבנה may well point to the future, so that the conjunction ו would function adversatively (“but”).⁷

Fifthly, in Jer 31:34 the explanation that mutual learning will no longer be necessary or practiced in Israel (ולא ילמדו עוד איש את־רעהו ואיש את־אחיו) moves away from the “Deuteronomistic” ideal of constant learning (cf. Deut 6:4-9); the idea is not in alignment with that quest. Krause acknowledges this problem, but he explains it away by pointing out that 31:34 refers to the eschatological future: “But what about Jer 31:34? The verse evidently alludes to the Deuteronomistic program of Torah instruction mainly in domestic settings (see again Deut 6:6–9), which, however utopian, is modeled on the practice of scribal education. Equally evident is the point that no such instruction will be needed anymore in the envisioned days after those days. However, this vision is precisely that: a vision of the eschatological future. As such, it does not do away with the present-day means for internalization of Yhwh’s Torah, namely, teaching and learning” (245–246). But the “writing of the heart” in Jer 31:33 belongs to the very same eschatological future as Jer 31:34: “I will write” is an imperfect, to be understood as a future action of God (ועל־לבם אכתבנה). Hence, Krause’s conclusion seems questionable: “If this reading holds, there is no anti-Deuteronomistic attack on the institutions of the book of the Torah and its mediation by catechetical means to be discerned in Jer 31:31–34. Rather, these institutions are apparently held in the highest esteem, for they figure as the model for undiluted communion with the divine as it is envisioned here” (246). To the contrary, these institutions seem to be preliminary (comparable to the exodus out of Egypt) and are to be overcome in the salvific future, where they are no longer necessary for the interaction between God and his people.

Sixthly, in Jer 31:31–34 there is no mention of a book, as Krause himself states: “Starting with Jer 31:33 and the alleged antithesis of the Torah written on the heart versus the Torah written in a book (i.e., on a scroll), we first of all need to state the obvious: No mention is made here of a book. But even assuming, for the sake of argument, that the addressees associated Yhwh’s Torah with both memorized and written words here, they certainly would not have seen any antagonism between the two. Quite the opposite, since having a text written on the heart is an idiom for having learned it by heart, which, according to scribal practice, presupposes a written version of that text as a fixed point of reference, the memorized Torah actually calls for the written. In any case, juxtaposing the two militates against anything the addressees knew of the interplay of orality, memory, and writing in the scribal maintenance of tradition” (245). True, but if there is no “antagonism”

⁷ For an overall discussion and a solution of his own see Hermann-Josef Stipp, *Jeremia 25–52*, HAT I/12,2 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018) 271–285.

between the memorized and the written Torah, then it is not possible to interpret Jer 31:33 as evoking the traditional practice of learning the Torah by heart, especially since Yhwh himself is the one who “writes.” Clearly, the divine imprint of this mediation of the Torah to Israel implies a change to traditional scribal learning.⁸

In sum, how is Krause’s proposal to be evaluated? I don’t think it is incorrect, but it tends to a harmonistic interpretation of the relationship between the implicitly “old” and the “new” covenant. Given the linguistic signs in Jer 31:31–34 that point to an antagonism between the two, it is at least unclear whether it is warranted to stress continuity rather than discontinuity between Israel’s present and future. In terms of determining the degree of overlap between Jer 31:31–34 and “Deuteronomistic” outlooks in biblical literature, Krause himself is quite careful: “However, this is not to argue that the pericope, idiosyncratic as it reads, should be associated with a Deuteronomistic redaction. It rather demonstrates the importance of the distinction, introduced by Hermann-Josef Stipp and Christl Maier, among others, between Deuteronomistic redactions and the broader phenomenon of ‘Deutero-Jeremianic’ material” (246–247).

Therefore, when interpreting Jer 31:31–34 in relation to scribal education, I think that we cannot go much further than David Carr’s statement in *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart*: “This is a vision of divine education in the book of Jeremiah built on the educational vision in the Deuteronomic utopia.”⁹

Abstract:

Dieser Beitrag ist eine kritische Auseinandersetzung mit Joachim J. Krause, “‘Writing on the Heart’ in Jeremiah 31:31–34 in Light of Recent Insights into the Oral-Written Interface and Scribal Education in Ancient Israel”, *ZAW* 132 (2020) 236–249.

This contribution includes a critical discussion of Joachim J. Krause, “‘Writing on the Heart’ in Jeremiah 31:31–34 in Light of Recent Insights into the Oral-Written Interface and Scribal Education in Ancient Israel”, *ZAW* 132 (2020) 236–249.

⁸ Stipp seems to think in a similar direction: “Zum anderen macht die Herzenseinschreibung die Krücke jener Schriftträger überflüssig, die die Tora bisher mit mäßigem Erfolg zu den Menschen brachte, nämlich die von Gott beschrifteten Steintafeln für den Dekalog und die Bücher bzw. Burchrollen für die gesamte schriftliche Tora” (ibid., 281).

⁹ Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart*, 149.

Cette contribution contient un examen critique de Joachim J. Krause, “‘Writing on the Heart’ in Jeremiah 31:31–34 in Light of Recent Insights into the Oral-Written Interface and Scribal Education in Ancient Israel”, *ZAW* 132 (2020) 236–249.

Konrad Schmid

konrad.schmid@access.uzh.ch

Professor für Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft und Frühjüdische Religionsgeschichte an der Universität Zürich